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WHY I AM A SOCIALIST.

By ANNIE BESANT.

"A Socialist! you don't mean to say you are a Socialist!" Such is the exclamation with which anyone who adopts the much-hated name of Socialist is sure to be greeted in "polite society". A Socialist is supposed to go about with his pocket full of bombs and his mind full of assassinations; he is a kind of wild beast, to be hunted down with soldiers if he lives under Bismarck, with sneers, abuse, and petty persecutions if he lives under Victoria. The very wildness of the epithets launched at him, however, shows how much there is of fear in the hatred with which he is regarded; and his opponents, by confining themselves to mere abuse, confess that they find themselves unable to cope with him intellectually. Prejudice and passion, not reasoned arguments, are the weapons relied on for his destruction. Once let the working classes understand what Socialism really is, and the present system is doomed; it is therefore of vital necessity that they shall be prevented from calmly studying its proposals, and shall be so deafened with the clamor against it that they shall be unable to hear the "still small voice" of reason. I do not challenge the effectiveness of the policy—for a time. It has been the policy of the governing classes against every movement that has been aimed against their privileges; Radicalism has been served in exactly similar fashion, and now that Radicalism has grown so strong that it can no longer be silenced by clamor, it is the turn of Socialism to pass through a like probation. There is always an ugly duckling in Society's brood; how else should be maintained the succession of swans?

With a not inconsiderable number of persons the prejudice against the name of Socialist is held to be a valid reason for not adopting it, and it is thought wiser to advocate the *thing*

without affronting the antagonism aroused against the *name*. With such a policy I have ever had no sympathy. It seems to me the wiser, as well as the franker course, to boldly wear any name which expresses an opinion held, and live down the prejudice it may awaken. The name Socialist is in itself a fine name, connoting as it does the social union; it is the recognised label of the school which holds as its central doctrine that land and the means of production should be the property of the social union, and not of privileged individuals in it; it is the one name which is recognised all the world over as the name of those who are opposed to political, religious, and social tyranny in every land; of those who look with brotherly sympathy on the efforts of every nation which is struggling for its freedom; of those who are on the side of the poor and the toiling everywhere; of those who recognise no barriers of nationality, of class, or of creed, but who see a brother in every worker, a friend in every lover of the people. Every political name is of the country in which it is born; but the name Socialist, like the name Atheist, is of no one land; it is valid in every country; it is whispered on Russian steppe, in German field, in French city, in Italian vineyard; and wherever it is heard the chains of the captive for a moment seem lighter, for Hope has lifted them, and the careworn faces of the toilers brighten, as a gleam from a sunnier day gilds the tools over which they bow.

Pass we from the name to the thing, from "the outer and visible sign to the inward and spiritual grace". Within the compass of a brief paper it is not possible for me to give all the reasons which have made me a Socialist, but there are three main lines of thought along which I travelled towards Socialism, and along which I would fain persuade my readers to travel also, in the hope that they too may find that they lead to the same goal.

I. *I am a Socialist because I am a believer in Evolution.* The great truths that organisms are not isolated creations, but that they are all linked together as parts of one great tree of life; that the simple precedes the complex; that progress is a process of continued integrations, and ever-increasing differentiations; these truths applied to the physical animated world by Darwin, Huxley, Haeckel, Büchner, and their followers, have unravelled the tangles of existence, have illuminated the hidden recesses of Nature. But the service to be done to science by Evolution was not completed when natural history was made a coherent whole instead of a heterogeneous heap of irrelevant facts; its light

next fell on the universe of mind, and traced the growth of mentality from the lowest organism that responds to a stimulus up to the creative brain of man. And still it had work to do, and next it reduced to order the jarring elements of the sphere of morals, and analysed duty and conscience, right and wrong, obligation and responsibity, until it rendered intelligible and consequent all that seemed supernatural and incoherent. And both in mind and in morals Spencer was the great servant of Evolution, illuminating the previous darkness by lucid exposition and by pregnant suggestion. But having done so much in the ordering of thought in every realm of study save one, it was not possible that Evolution should leave Sociology untouched, a mere chaos of unrelated facts, of warring opinions. Hither also came the light, and out of the chaos slowly grew a cosmos. Society was seen evolving from lowliest savagery, from the embryonic state of barbarism, through nomad life to settled order, through tribes to nation, through feudalism to industrialism, through industrialism to —— Nowhither? Evolution complete? Further progress barred? Not so. For science, which cannot prophesy details of the future, can grasp tendencies of the present, and recognising the conditions of the social growth of the past, can see how the present has been moulded, and along which lines its further development must inevitably pass. Now the progress of society has been from individualistic anarchy to associated order; from universal unrestricted competition to competition regulated and restrained by law, and even to partial co-operation in lieu thereof. Production from being individualistic has become co-operative; large bodies of workmen toiling together have replaced the small groups of masters and apprentices; factory production has pushed aside cottage production, and industrial armies are seen instead of industrial units. Laws for the regulation of industry—which failed when they were made by a few for their own advantage, and were used in the vain effort to keep down the majority—have been carried and applied successfully to some extent in defence of the liberty of the majority against the oppression of a privileged few. Since the partial admission of the workers to the exercise of political power, these laws for the regulation of industry have rapidly multiplied, and at the same time laws which hindered the free association of the workers have been repealed. The State has interfered with factories and workshops, to fix the hours of labor, to insist on sanitary arrangements, to control the employment of the young. Land Acts and Ground Game Acts, Education Acts and Shipping Acts, Employers' Liability Acts and Artisans' Dwellings Acts, crowd our Statute book. Everywhere the old ideas of free contract, of non-interference, are being outraged by modern

legislation. And it is not only Socialists who point to these reiterated interferences as signs of the tendencies of society. John Morley, in his "Life of Cobden", notes that England, where Socialism is supposed to have but small influence, has a body of Socialistic legislation greater than can found in any other country in the world.

II. *I am a Socialist because of the failure of our present civilisation.* In an article which appeared in the July number of the *Westminster Review*, after alluding to Professor Huxley's declaration that he would rather have been born a savage in one of the Fiji islands than have been born in a London slum, I put the following question, which I will venture to quote here. "Is it rational that the progress of society should be as lopsided as it is? Is it necessary that, while civilisation brings to some art, beauty, refinement—all that makes life fair and gracious—it should bring to others drudgery, misery, degradation, such as no uncivilised people know? and these emphasised and rendered the bitterer by the contrast of what life is to many, the dream of what it might be to all. For Professor Huxley is right. The savage has the forest and the open sea, the joy of physical strength, food easily won, leisure sweet after the excitement of the chase; the civilised toiler has the monotonous drudgery of the stuffy workshop, the hell of the gin-palace for his pleasure-ground, the pandemonium of reeking court and stifling alley for his lullaby; civilisation has robbed him of all natural beauty and physical joy, and has given him in exchange—the slum. It is little wonder that, under these circumstances, there are many who have but scant respect for our social fabric, and who are apt to think that any change cannot land them in a condition worse than that in which they already find themselves."

Now if this view should spread widely among the inhabitants of the slums, it is obvious that the present civilisation would stand in very considerable peril, and it would be likely to sink, as feudalism sank in France, beneath the waves of a popular revolution. But such a revolution, sweeping from the slums over the happier parts of the towns, would not be a revolution set going by men of genius, directed by men of experience and of knowledge, as was the French Revolution of 1789. It would be a mad outburst of misery, of starvation, of recklessness, which would for a brief space sweep everything before it, and behind it would leave a desolate wilderness. Walk at midnight through the streets near the Tower, along Shadwell High Street, or about "Tiger Bay", and imagine what would happen if those drunken men and women, singing, shouting, fighting, in the streets, were to burst the barriers that hem them in, and were to surge westwards over London, wrecking the civilisation

which had left them to putrefy in their misery, and had remained callous to their degradation. Is it not the part of a good citizen to try to change a social system which bears such products as these in every great city?

The slum population, however, is not wholly composed of such persons as I have spoken of. Large numbers of honest, temperate, industrious people are forced by poverty, and by the necessity of being near their work, into the dismal fate of living in the slums. And among them is spreading a discontent which is pregnant with change. Education is awakening in them desires and hopes which find no satisfaction in the slums. It is opening to them wider views of human life, and the penny newspaper tells them of enjoyments and luxuries of which they would have known nothing, pent in the dreary mill-round of their toiling lives, had ignorance kept them blind. Slowly is being formed that "educated proletariat" which shall work out its own salvation, and which shall refuse any longer to act as the basis on which is reared the pyramid of civilisation. The present civilisation rests on the degradation of the workers; in order that they may accept their lot they must be kept poor, ignorant, submissive; the culture of their superiors is paid for with their ignorance; the graceful leisure of the aristocrat is purchased by the rough toil of the plebeian; his dainty fingers are kept soft and white by the hardening and reddening of the poor man's hands; the workers are daily sacrificed that the idlers may enjoy. Such is modern civilisation. Brilliant and beautiful where it rises into the sunlight, its foundation is of human lives made rotten with suffering. Whited sepulchre in very truth, with its outer coating of princes and lords, of bankers and squires, and within filled with dead men's bones, the bones of the poor who builded it.

Most hopeful sign, perhaps, for the future is the fact that discontent with the present system is not confined to those who are in a special sense its victims. In every class of society are found men and women who look and work for a complete revolution in the method of the production and distribution of wealth. Among those who profit most by the present system are found the most eager workers against it, and many whose lot is cast among the "comfortable classes" are striving to undermine the very constitution which gives them the privileges they enjoy. In them sympathy has triumphed over selfishness, and their own rich wine of life tastes sour when they see the bitter water of poverty pressed to their brothers' lips. They are indignant that their own hands should be so full while others' hands are empty; and would fain lessen their own heap in order that the share of their neighbors may be made equal with their own.

At present the Socialist movement in England is far more a middle-class than a working-class one; the creed of Socialism is held as an intellectual conviction by the thoughtful and the studious, and is preached by them to the workers, who have everything to gain by accepting it, and some of whom have already embraced and are teaching it. Instead of being a class movement, it is a movement of men and women of all classes for a common end, and the Socialist army is composed of persons of various social ranks, who have renounced for themselves the class distinctions they are banded together to destroy.

III. *I am a Socialist because the poverty of the workers is, and must continue to be, an integral part of the present method of wealth-production and wealth-distribution.* Under that method land, capital, and labor, the three factors in wealth-production, are divorced from each other, and landless, capitalless labor—which must sell itself to live—lies at the mercy of the privileged classes. The owner of the land demands a share of the produce raised on or from it, and this share is claimed by him not because he helps in gaining the produce, but because he owns the raw material of the soil, and can prevent anyone from utilising it, if he so pleases. The land is his; for him the rain softens and the sunshine warms the soil; for him sweet Mother Nature bares her fragrant bosom, and pours out the treasures with which her arms are laden; for him she has been working through the silent centuries, growing her forests, carbonising her buried vegetable treasures, storing her vast unseen realms with gem and ore of metal, building through myriads of ages by life and death, by creation and destruction, by swift birth and slow decay. And all this toil of ages, wrought out by the mighty unseen forces, finds its end in my Lord Emptyhead, who stretches out his useless hands over the noble product, and cries to his countless brothers, "This is mine!". Then he bargains with them, and claims the right to tax their labor in exchange for permitting them to use what ought to be the common property, and to tax it, moreover, in proportion to its success. Thus Dukes of Westminster, of Bedford, and of Portland; Marquises of Londonderry, of Anglesey, and of Bute; Earls of Derby and of Dudley; with many another beside; all these grow ever and ever wealthier, not because they work, but because their ancestors by force or fraud got grip of the soil, and in days when the people were unrepresented made laws which secured to them and their descendants the monstrous monopoly of natural agents. As the people multiply and press ever more and more on the means of subsistence, they have to pay more and more to the owners thereof; and while private property in land is permitted to exist, so long will the landless lie at the landlord's mercy, and wealthy idler and poverty-

stricken worker will form integral parts of our social, or rather anti-social, system.

Similarly is a share of the worker's product claimed by the class which holds as individual property the accumulated wealth made by generations of toilers, the present means of production; this wealth is obtained by forcing labor to accept as "wage" less than the value it creates; unless it will accept these terms it is not permitted to create any value at all, so that it has the choice between starvation and exploitation. The share of its own produce which it receives as wage varies from time to time; sometimes it is less, sometimes more; but it is always less than the value made by it. Only when there is a "profit" to be made—that is when the capitalist can get out of his "hands" more value than he returns to them as wage—will he employ them. The machines which have been invented by human genius, and which ought to lessen human labor, are used to make fortunes for a few. A skilful workman sees a possible improvement; his master reaps the profit of the improved machine, patenting it for his own enrichment. Huge fortunes rapidly made date from the invention of machinery, because only by the possession of machinery can a man utilise the labor of many for such swift gain. Possessing this, he is in a position of advantage which enables him to say to his fellow-men: "You shall use my machinery on condition that you are content with bare subsistence, and leave to me the wealth which flows from you and the machine". Thus machinery, which is one of the advantages of civilisation, gives wealth to its individual owner, and bare subsistence to the toilers who work with it. And so long as the possession of all the mechanical advantages is in the hands of individuals, so long will they be able to enslave and exploit those who have only their natural tools, and the machine-owner may lie at his ease and watch the growing piles of his wealth, as his bondmen heap it together, and gratefully accept the fraction of it which his higher servants fling to them as wage. Poverty will last so long as one class depends on another for "employment"; so long as one man must sell another man his labor at whatever rate the condition of the market may fix. Free men may associate their labor for a common end, and divide the common product; slaves are obliged to let their labor be at the direction of their master, and to accept subsistence in exchange.

Class distinctions will endure while men stand in the position of employer and employed; the one who holds the means of subsistence feels himself superior to the one who craves them. And this is not all. The life-surroundings of the rich fashion an organism easily distinguishable from the organism produced

by the life-surroundings of the poor. Take two healthy week-old babies, one the child of a ploughman and the other the child of a duke; place them side by side, and the keenest eye will not be able to separate the aristocrat and the plebeian. But give to one the best education and to the other none, and place them side by side when each is grown to manhood, and the easy polished manner and soft speech of the one will be contrasted with the clumsy roughness and stumbling articulation of the other. Education, training, culture, these make class distinctinctions, and nothing can efface them save common education and equally refined life-surroundings. Such education and life-surroundings cannot be shared so long as some enjoy wealth they do not earn, and others are deprived of the wealth they do earn. Land and capital must be made common property, and then no man will be in a position to enslave his brother by placing before him the alternative of starvation or servitude. And because no system save that of Socialism claims that there shall be no individual monopoly of that on which the whole nation must depend, of the soil on which it is born and must subsist, of the capital accumulated by the labor of its innumerable children, living and dead; because no system save that of Socialism claims for the whole community control of its land and its capital; because no system save that of Socialism declares that wealth created by associated workers should be shared among those workers, and that no idlers should have a lien upon it; because no system save that of Socialism makes industry really free and the worker really independent, by substituting co-operation among workers for employed and employing classes; because of all this I am a Socialist. My Socialism is based on the recognition of economic facts, on the study of the results which flow inevitably from the present economic system. The pauper and the millionaire are alike its legitimate children; the evil tree brings forth its evil fruits.

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